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SUBJECT: ANBAR MODERATE CLERICS SHARE THEIR VIEWS ON
ENGAGING THE US

11. (U) This is a PRT Anbar reporting cable.

12. (SBU) Summary: While largely misunderstood by outsiders, the role of the mosque was crucial in winning the battle against Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) in Anbar Province. Local contacts are firm in their belief that the re-taking of the mosques from radicals was a critical factor in the winning of hearts and minds. April 23 Anbar PRT met with two Sunni Endowment leaders who fought in both the ideological and physical struggle against Al-Qaeda in Iraq. They talked about their experiences during the insurgency and affirm that while moderates are in charge of the mosques today, radicals may still make inroads among the youth. They favor a deeper "cultural dialogue" with the U.S.. End Summary.

Moderate Clerics

13. (SBU) The battle for Anbar Province tipped in GOI favor in 12007. A key factor in that development was the shift in public opinion, in which AQI was re-defined as the enemy, and Coalition Forces (CF) gradually came to be seen as an ally. The role of the mosque in influencing that change in the public mood is still poorly understood by outsiders, but virtually all PRT contacts)- both government officials and tribal leaders)- cite the importance of moderate clerics assuming leadership of the mosques that had fallen under radical influence. If the mosques fomented insurrection in 2004-05, it is clear that they helped to stabilize the situation in 2006-07.

14. (SBU) PRT met with two Ramadi-based clerics to get a better understanding of the ideological struggle against radical Islam. (Note: Both clerics are widely viewed here as moderates and bear the physical scars from combat with AQI. End Note) At an April 23 meeting Abdullah Jallal al-Faraj told PRT: "If you find a mosque that is preaching radicalism, tell us and we will visit it, and change the messages to moderation and tolerance.⁸ Abdullah is a portly forty-something, who once competed in national soccer. He now heads up Anbar's office of the Sunni Endowment, and uses that position to ensure that the mosque preachers (Al-Khutiba') stay on a message of moderation. Today, he says some "500,000 citizens hear our message of peace and tolerance every Friday."

15. (SBU) Dr. Thamir Al-Assafi, a Ramadi native and the Endowment's senior theologian, joined Abdullah at the April 23 meeting and explained that his interest in theology came after his service as a commando in the Iran-Iraq war. In his presentation, he was strongly anti-Iranian, but came down equally hard on Sunni extremism. "We will beat down the 'takfiri' using the power of true Islam," he said. (Note: "Takfiri" is an Arabic word denoting those who denounce other Muslims for the sin of apostasy. It is commonly used describe to followers of militant Sunni ideologies. End Note)

He cites the Endowment's responsibility to propagate correct religious teaching. "We will even get rid of the term 'moderate' because it truly is redundant," he said.

----- The Battle for Ramadi -----

¶6. (SBU) The role of Abdullah and Thamir in the fight against AQI goes back to September 2006, when the late Sheikh Sattar Abu Risha and a group of like-minded tribal leaders in Ramadi formed the Anbar Awakening Council. That group encouraged local youths to join the police force, and with the aid of CF, ultimately expelled AQI from the city. Soon after the Awakening was founded, Sattar sought the Endowment to issue a "fatwa," or official religious decree, to legitimize the Awakening's aims. Abdullah and Thamir obliged. Although the two were ideologically in tune with Sattar, they moved carefully. Such a decree was controversial because it called on the public to reassess its sympathies to AQI, which it had previously viewed as the defender of Sunni interests. Another issue was Sattar himself. The clerics wished to avoid being seen as giving moral support to a man who had a penchant for alcohol and whose source of personal wealth (black-marketeering) was suspect. In the end, the fatwa gave the public the permission to oppose AQI. It also declared that its brand of Islam was false and that it engaged in un-Islamic practices.

¶7. (SBU) Moreover, the clerics made it permissible for the people to cooperate with the CF, a notion that ran against the prevailing sentiment among Iraq's Sunni religious establishment, which viewed the CF as occupiers. In November 2006, for example, Sattar traded media insults with Hareth

BAGHDAD 00001334 002 OF 002

Al-Dhari, the leader of the anti-government Association of Muslim Scholars, with Sattar openly referring to the CF as "friendly forces" and displaying the American flag at his Ramadi compound. Al-Dhari called him an "agent" of the "US occupation." Summing up that period of the insurgency, Abdullah says that it was the combination of Sattar's vision plus the Endowment's moral authority that tipped the scales on the battlefield.

----- Reclaiming the Mosques -----

¶8. (SBU) Nonetheless, AQI still exercised influence over key mosques. Abdullah was under a death threat. In early 2007, he asked the CF to arrange a security detail for him, comprised of local members of the "emergency police battalions," the forerunner to the Sons of Iraq, so that he could visit mosques. "I will kick the bad guys out of the mosques," Abdullah recalls his telling CF officers in those days. By a series of personal engagements, Abdullah fired some mosque speakers (al-khutiba') and persuaded others to moderate their sermons. Gradually the radical hold loosened. Today radicalism in the mosques has fallen to "nearly zero," in Abdullah's estimation.

¶9. (SBU) Abdullah says that the mosques are currently controlled by the moderates; he is still concerned that "the poor and uneducated" are susceptible to AQI recruitment. Curiously, he sees an increased American civilian presence in Anbar as the antidote. "The more American cultural presence we have in Anbar, the more we can support and reach out to these vulnerable people."

----- Cultural Dialogue -----

¶10. (SBU) Thamir added that "if America wants to weaken the appeal of Al-Qaeda" it should engage in a "cultural

dialogue." On that theme, both he and Abdullah made the following points during the discussion:

-- The US should establish a "consulate" in Anbar, as well as a cultural center, and an English language center.

-- They want Arabic translations of American literature in the schools.

-- They support the presence of American NGOs, and see their role in helping to provide basic services. "Where are the American NGOs? We want private NGOs in every town," Thamir said.

-- Both clerics favor inter-faith dialogue with the "People of the Book", and both had critical words about Western Muslims with pro-AQI sympathies. They claim to have met such persons on the hajj and believe they are mis-guided about AQI. "They don't know what we know," Thamir said. "We must talk to them about the reality of Al-Qaeda, because it is not Islam. Our society has seen the damage of radical ideologies."

-- The clerics support elections and want women to vote. Thamir added that he will go together with his wife to register to vote as an example to others.

A Center to Combat Extremism

¶11. (SBU) Both sought financial support for the unfunded Center to Combat Foreign Ideologies (Al-Markez Al-Wiqaii li-Muajihad Al-Afkhar Al-Dakheela), a body that Abdullah recently established. The center has already published short essays on religious themes and has plans for larger book-length studies. Planned topics include: the damage caused by extremist ideology; civil rights and responsibilities; public freedom in Islam; the moderate criteria for fatwas; respecting people's rights; and the Muslim role in reform.

¶12. (SBU) Comment: Abdullah and Thamir have obviously left the door open for further dialogue. Several PRT initiatives suggest themselves, including nominating Anbari clerics for an International Visitor's program on inter-faith dialogue, and support for Abdullah's research center. We will be calling on them again. End comment.
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